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Winter Garden Guide

Grab a journal to record your thoughts as you read the book and explore the questions posed in this guide. The guide is meant to help you examine themes and layers of the story. Consider how the questions connect in your own life.

As you read this book, record your thoughts on the characters' stories and your own life story. *Try not to judge any of it.* This might be difficult, but try to stand back and observe.

Book: *Winter Garden* by Kristin Hannah

Winter Garden is a novel set in WWII Russia and present-day America. We become spellbound by the fairy tales told within the story as we try to imagine what life must have been like for Anya during the war and what life was like for her daughters growing up in America. It is a tale of love, loss, trauma, war, detachment, PTSD, discovery, and reconciliation.

When I discovered this book by Kristin Hannah, I was actually looking for a book by an author. Next to the other author's book was *Winter Garden*. At first I was not sure I wanted to read it because while I love WWII novels, I was looking for something not war related. However, after reading the book description, I had to buy it. Once I began reading, I could not put it down.

While this is a fiction novel, there are so many layers to it that may apply to any reader's family and life, particularly those who had parents live through WWII and emigrate to the U.S. The stories, secrets, lies, detachment, trauma, judgment, questions and answers, and finally reconciliation and closure, are all things every family goes through at some point in every generation. There are many things this book offers us which expand our living and contribute to the possibilities of healing our pasts and lives.

The journey this family took together through fairy tales and travel spoke to me. I am a storyteller who loves to travel. These are two primary ways I heal myself and the past. Storytelling and travel are primary ways many of us heal. I hope you enjoy this book as much as I did. I hope you discover more about yourself and your family and the infinite possibilities life has for you.

Reading Guide Questions

1. As you read this novel, consider the ways your family, at any generation, is similar to Anya's. Journal your thoughts on this and explain how they are similar.
 - a. It might be helpful to sketch out a family tree or mind map and jot down experiences that each generation had that are similar in some way.
2. Think about any promises you have made to your family about NOT exploring a family secret or a person's life. Do you think Meredith and Nina ever made a promise to not explore their mother's life – consciously or unconsciously?
3. The living and the dead can't always keep their secrets. Have you ever asked yourself why we keep letters, photos, diaries, and other documents or books that hold our secrets? Our dark nights of the soul? How often do we actually look at these items again after we create them? Do we really want our descendants knowing all this about us?
 - a. What do you think about the items Nina and Meredith discovers that tell them their mother's story? How would Nina and Meredith's life be different at the end of the novel had they not found these things?
4. As humans we tend to judge everything.
 - a. In what ways does Meredith judge her mother while she grows up?
 - b. In what ways does Nina judge her mother? How does she cope with the way she was brought up?
 - c. In what ways does do the sisters each judge their sister, father, and herself?
 - d. How does this judgment impact and shape Nina's and Meredith's perception of their mother?
5. War creates terrible situations in which someone must make choices. Often we wonder if anyone makes it out of those situations unchanged and whole.
 - a. What kind of strength did Anya have to move through the situations in which she was put?
 - b. What kind of sacrifices did Anya make? How did those affect the rest of her life? How did those affect the way she raised her daughters and lived her marriage?

- c. Is it appropriate for Meredith or Nina to ask the question, *What would I have done?* Explain your reasoning.
 - d. Have you ever asked the question, *What would I have done?* In regard to your family's history?
 - e. Do you think Anya's experiences shaped who Nina became and the work she chose consciously or unconsciously?
6. As many historians, authors, and genealogists explore the "male war" and the service of the men in their families or as a unit, women are often left out and ignored. Describe all the ways Anya and other women fought their war in Russia.
7. War – synonyms: conflict, warfare, combat, fighting, bloodshed, struggle, clash, engagement, encounter, attack, hostilities. We tend to associate most of these terms with World War II or other wars. However, the words *struggle, clash, engagement, attack, hostilities, conflict*, are all words used to describe how we interact with our families and ourselves.
 - a. Explain why you think, or do not, that Anya was still fighting a war when she created her life in America.
 - b. Explain why you think, or do not, that her daughters were fighting a war growing up.
8. Do you think Anya, her husband, their daughters had PTSD? Explain why or why not.
 - a. Do you think Nina had PTSD from the work she did? Explain your thoughts on this.
9. Inherited trauma is defined as trauma that is transferred from the first generation of trauma survivors to the second and further generations of offspring of the survivors via complex post-traumatic stress disorder mechanisms. Do you see signs of this in Anya's family? Explain your thoughts.
 - a. Explain the trauma Nina faces and consider how, without healing some of that, she will pass it to her future children. Do you think she has an obligation to reconcile any of her experiences or feelings? Explain this.
10. Explain how each family member separated from the others in the story. Explain when they began coming together.

- a. How did this change Anya, Nina and Meredith?
11. List the people from whom you have separated in your life. Why did you choose this or was it chosen for you?
 - a. Explain the moment that reconciliation happened, if it did and how that changed your life.
 12. As you read the story, explain how Nina and Meredith change as they journey together into their mother's past.
 - a. Who do you think changed the most on the journey and why?
 13. Explore the ways your family's past has affected your present. Write about this in your journal.
 14. Are there any stories or secrets in your family's past that you would now like to explore? List them and create a short plan on how you will do this.
 15. Explain how taking this journey will possibly change your life or your descendant's lives.